

Culturally Responsive Differentiated Instructional Strategies

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Using Differentiated Instruction to Address Disproportionality

What is Differentiated Instruction?

Typical Classroom: A sixth grade social studies class is beginning to study the Civil Rights Movement. Some students are two and three years ahead of grade level in reading; others are that far behind. Some have expressed prior knowledge and interest in the topic and are eager to learn more. Others are unfamiliar with the topic, and don't seem interested at all. A few have learning disabilities. Some are in various stages of learning English. But the teacher is engaging all of these students and teaching them at the same time by differentiating the instruction.

How is this accomplished?

Differentiated instruction is an approach to teaching and learning for students with different abilities in the same classroom. The theory behind differentiated instruction is that teachers should vary and adapt their approaches to fit the vast diversity of students in the classroom. (Tomlinson, 1995, 1999a; Hall, 2002). Teachers who differentiate instruction recognize that students differ in many ways, including prior knowledge and experiences, readiness, language, culture, learning preferences, and interests. They realize they must change the way they teach in order to reach all students. Through differentiated instruction, students will get to the same place, but take different paths (*See sample lessons below*).

The disproportionate representation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in high-incidence special education programs (mental retardation, learning disabilities, and emotional disturbance) has been a concern for more than three decades (Klingner, Artiles, et.al, 2005). Extensive research suggests many factors are at play in the disproportionate representation of minority students in special education including a teacher's lack of knowledge about culturally

and linguistically diverse children (Villegas & Lucas, 2002), and their propensity to label the behavior of these students' as negative and inappropriate (Klinger, Artiles, et. al. 2005). Klingner, Artiles, et.al. (2005) recommend the creation of a culturally responsive education system grounded in the belief that all culturally and linguistically diverse students can excel in school when their culture, language, heritage and experiences are valued and used to facilitate their learning and development and they are provided access to high quality teachers, programs and resources.

Differentiated instruction speaks directly to these issues because it recognizes and expects that students are different and teaching needs to be adjusted to these differences. Advocates of differentiated instruction believe that whatever the issue or problem a student might face, with the right teaching approach the student can and will learn. In fact, student differences are studied as a basis for planning. Tomlinson notes that schools sometimes deal with differences inside the classroom by sending some youngsters, often the so-called troublemakers and learning disabled, out of the regular classroom for their education. "But our choice isn't between sending them down the hall or doing nothing. We can differentiate in the regular classroom" (Hess 1999).

The Principles of Differentiated Instruction

There is no "how to" recipe for differentiation because teachers who value the individual can translate it into classroom practices in many ways. However, there are certain broad principles and characteristics involved in establishing a differentiated instruction classroom, according to Tomlinson (2000b):

Assessment is ongoing and tightly linked to instruction. Teachers constantly gather information about how their students are doing at a given point in order to plan instruction.

Teachers ensure “respectful activities” for all students. Each student’s work should be equally interesting, appealing and focused on essential understandings and skills. Teachers and students should see all tasks as worthwhile and valuable.

Flexible grouping is a hallmark of the class. Teachers design instruction to allow all students to work with a variety of peers over a period of days. Sometimes students work with peers on the same level of readiness and sometimes with different levels of readiness. Sometimes they work with peers with similar interests, sometimes with peers with different interests; at other times, the students work with peers who learn as they do, sometimes randomly and often with the class as a whole.

Teachers can differentiate at least four classroom elements based on student readiness, interest, or learning profile: **(1) content** – what the student needs to learn or how the student will get access to the information; **(2) process** – activities in which the student engages in order to make sense of or master the content; **(3) products** – projects that ask the student to demonstrate what he or she has learned in a unit; and **(4) learning environment** – the way the classroom works and feels.

To clarify what differentiated instruction is, it is necessary to note a couple of things it specifically *is not*.

1. When assignments are the same for all learners, but the level of difficulty of assignments is varied for certain students than others, and students who finish early play games for enrichment – the class *is not* differentiated (Tomlinson 1995).
2. Differentiated instruction has nothing to do with “dumbing down” or “watering down” instruction or the standards to make it easier for some students.
3. Differentiated instruction also *is not* individualized instruction, which proposes to design materials and tasks for the particular needs of each student. Differentiated instruction suggests

teachers look at “zones” in which students cluster so they can offer three or four routes to a goal on a given day (Bafile 2004).

Aligning Differentiated Instruction with Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

During the 2002-03 school year, 4 million (8% of all students) in public schools received ELL services (NCES, 2005). Nearly 42% (41.7%) of all children in public schools, grades K-12 are students of color (NCES, 2005). While this student diversity has been present for more than two decades, within the past ten years, there has not been a significant change in the makeup of our nation's teachers (Paley, 2000; Kunjufu, 2002).

Most elementary and secondary school teachers are white (87%) and female (74%) (AACTE, 1999). Schools of education are turning out a significant number of white female teachers which leads researchers to believe that white teachers in public schools have increased to nearly 90%, while African American teachers comprise as little as 7% of the nation's teaching force (Snyder, 1999). Although the teaching force has dramatically changed in our public schools, the curriculum and approach to teaching its diverse students has not. Education research shows that children learn best when their culture and language are reflected in the school's curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 1997; Tatum, 2003; Gay, 2000; Franklin, et al., 2001; Howard, 1999). In today's schools, students of color are taught a test-driven, Eurocentric curriculum that does not connect with their historical and sociocultural experiences.

Our culture shapes our values, attitudes, beliefs and behavior. It is an intrinsic part of who we are and how we identify ourselves. Our culture also molds our experiences and how we interpret those defining moments in our lives. Classroom teachers, school administrators, and policymakers carry their cultural experiences

and perspectives into their everyday decisions and actions – educational and personal – and so do students from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds (Gay, 2000).

Many students of color have an understanding of and some have internalized negative images of their race (Gay, 2000). These negative images, promoted by the larger society, affect how they perform in school (Noguera, 2003). Schools are uniquely positioned to help students interpret and interrupt this imagery through interactions with curriculum and teachers that validate their culture. Tatum (2003) described an oppositional identity development in which Black students are forced to choose between affirming their culture and academic success. When their culture is not present, Black students may feel that academic success is not part of being Black. In contrast, students who see their culture represented in the curriculum are more likely to have a higher self-concept, and when students feel good about themselves they are more likely to be open with others and to learning (Gay, 2000).

A culturally responsive pedagogy allows for the discussion of difficult topics – like racism, discrimination and prejudice – and offers students of all ages the opportunity to engage in meaningful discussion that enhances learning. Because a culturally responsive pedagogy acknowledges the presence of racism that creates distorted and negative images of the cultures, histories and possibilities of people of color (Beaubeouf-Lafontant, 1999), culturally responsive classrooms can create a space where harmful images can be deconstructed and positive self and cultural affirmations portrayed.

The principles of differentiated instruction lend itself to the culturally responsive pedagogical approach because it creates opportunity for a myriad of investigations into one lesson or topic at the same time. With differentiated instruction, students of color can explore a topic through a teaching approach that best meets their learning style, while examining the values, beliefs, and ideas that shape their experiences.

Getting Started: The Seven Building Blocks of Differentiated Instruction

Forsten, Grant and Hollas, (in progress) have identified the “building blocks” of successful differentiated instruction. These elements address the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students because they reflect an approach to teaching and learning that requires teachers to do things differently for different children. The researchers suggest these building blocks and invite teachers to add elements to each.

1. Knowing the Learner: Teachers need to know as much as possible about their students to teach them well, including learning styles and pace, multiple intelligences, personal qualities such as personality, temperament and motivation, personal interests, potential disabilities, health, family circumstances, and language preference.

2. Traits of a Quality Teacher: The teacher believes all students can learn, has the desire and capacity to differentiate curriculum and instruction, understands diversity and thinks about students developmentally, is a risk taker, is open to change and well-versed in best practices, is comfortable challenging the status quo, knows what doesn't work, is able to withstand staff dissension that may arise.

3. Quality Curriculum: Curriculum needs to be interesting to students and relevant to their lives, appropriately challenging and complex, thought provoking, focused on concepts and principles and not just facts; focused on quality, not quantity; stress depth of learning, not just coverage.

4. Classroom Learning Environment: The ideal learning environment includes a balanced student population, appropriate grade and program placement, priority seating based on student needs, has a reasonable class size, practices positive discipline, arranges furniture to promote group work, uses flexible grouping, and has adequate teaching supplies.

5. Flexible Teaching and Learning Time

Resources: Includes team teaching, block scheduling, tutoring and remediation within school, before and after-school programs, homework clubs, multiage/looping classrooms.

6. Instructional Delivery and Best Practices:

Includes flexible grouping, cooperative learning, learning stations and centers, web quests, tiered assignments, individual contracts, literature circles.

7. Assessment, Evaluation and Grading:

Includes portfolios, observations, skills checklists, oral and written reports,

demonstrations, performances, work samples, models, taped responses, drawings, graphs and posters, quizzes and tests, and standardized tests

When teachers teach students the same thing in the same way, usually the result is that some students “get it” and some don’t. To gain a better understanding of what differentiated instruction is, it is helpful to compare traditional and differentiated classrooms. The chart below highlights some differences (Tomlinson, 1999a). Examine the approaches between the typical traditional classroom and a differentiated classroom.

Table 1: Comparison of Traditional and Differentiated Classrooms

Traditional Classroom	Differentiated Classroom
Student differences masked or acted upon when problematic	Student differences are studied as a basis for planning
Assessment is most common at the end of learning to see “who got it”	Assessment is ongoing and diagnostic to understand how to make instruction more responsive to learner need
A relatively narrow sense of intelligence prevails	Focus on multiple forms of intelligence is evident
A single definition of excellence prevails	Excellence is defined in large measure by individual growth from a starting point
Student interests infrequently tapped	Students are frequently guided in making interest-based learning choices
Relatively few learning profile options are taken into account	Many learning profile options are honored
Whole class instruction dominates	Many instructional arrangements are used
Coverage of texts and curriculum guides drives instruction	Student readiness, interest, and learning profile shape instruction
Mastery of facts and skills out of context are the focus of learning	Use of essential skills to make sense of and understand key concepts and principles is the focus of learning
Single option assignments are the norm	Multi-option assignment are frequently used
Time is relatively inflexible	Time is used flexibly in accordance with student need
A single text prevails	Multiple materials are provided
Single interpretation of ideas and events may be sought	Multiple perspectives on ideas and events are routinely sought
The teacher solves problems	Students help other students and the teacher solve problems
The teacher provides whole-class standards for grading	Students work with the teacher to establish both whole-class and individual goals
A single form of assessment is often used	Students are assessed in multiple ways

Summary

However you start, differentiation takes effort, time and is a career long pursuit. Successful differentiated instruction teachers should give themselves three or more years to really feel savvy with it (Wormeli, 2003). Once you have started the effort, there are some important elements to keep it going. Sustained staff development is critical. You don't learn to differentiate instruction in a one-afternoon workshop. District and school leadership are key to making implementation work. Their attitudes and the amount of support they provide are critical (Willis and Mann, 2000). Small classes are ideal settings, but it can be done in large classes, too. Block scheduling allows a workshop environment that can contribute to the success of differentiated instruction because some differentiated activities take two to three weeks (Hess, 1999).

Resources

Sample Lessons

The web has many sites that contain sample differentiated instruction lessons in various subjects and grade levels. Several sites are included in the resource list. Here are a few lessons New York State and Charleston County, South Carolina School District recommends to help teachers get started:

Example: Differentiated Science and History Lesson Plans

<http://www.trecenter.org/udl/lessonplans.htm>

Example: Differentiated Math Lesson Grades 6-8

http://www.exemplars.com/math_6-8/math_sample_6-8.html

Alternative Ideas for Book Reporting in the Primary Grades (K-3)

<http://tst1160-35.k12.fsu.edu/Elbookreports.html>

Literature: The Cay (Grades 5-6)

<http://tst1160-35.k12.fsu.edu/MidLitCay.html>

Social Studies: Presidents (4)

<http://tst1160-35.k12.fsu.edu/Elsspres.html>

Helpful Resources

- Enhancing Your Instruction Through Differentiation – A professional development module developed by the Access Center, complete with PowerPoint presentation, facilitator's guide, handouts and lists of resources. http://www.k8accesscenter.org/training_resources/differentiationmodule.asp
- Glossary of Differentiation of Instruction Terms – Defines important terms. <http://webtech.cherokee.k12.ga.us/wordstock-esAim/contentsgazettes.htm>
- Staff Development for Educators – Timely information on differentiated instruction seminars, workshops, conferences, videos and other resources. www.differentiatedinstruction.com
- ASCD Differentiated Instruction Resources – Site features books, audios, videos, on-line courses, information about on-site training, conferences and workshops <http://www.ascd.org/portal/site/ascd/menuitem.3adeebc6736780dddeb3ffdb62108a0c/>
- Internet4classrooms – Information on instructional theory behind differentiated

instruction, classroom tips, sample units and lessons, and links to other sites
<http://www.internet4classrooms.com/di.htm>

- Delving into Differentiation in Middle School – Articles, books, websites, journals; compiled by students at the University of Maine at Farmington
<http://www.mamleonline.org/resources/differentiation/resources.htm>

- Teachers network.org – Articles on adjusting teaching styles to students' learning styles. Accepts your questions about differentiated instruction via email
<http://teachersnetwork.org/ntol/howto/adjust/index.htm>

- Differentiated Instruction Background and General Information – Information about learning styles, multiple intelligences, teaching strategies, lesson plans, authentic assessment, on-line tutorials. You can start with and on-line quiz to determine your own learning style.
http://www.frsd.k12.nj.us/rfmslibrarylab/differentiated_instruction.htm

- Differentiating Instruction Using Technology – How technology can support differentiating efforts in the classroom. Includes information about assessment, sample lessons, examples of technology projects
<http://www.ccsdedtech.com/tresources/differentiation.htm>

- Reading Rockets – Differentiating instruction to teach reading
<http://www.readingrockets.org/articles/c64/>

- CAST.org: Differentiated Instruction and Implications for UD Implementation
www.cast.org/publications/ncac/ncac_diffinstructudl.html

Differentiated Instruction Consultants

- Profiles on more than a dozen experts in the field, many with sample video clips.
<http://www.sde.com/CTS/CTPresentersbyTopic.html#Differentiated%20Instruction>

Videos

- The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) has an extensive list of videos on differentiated instruction available for purchase.
<http://www.ascd.org/portal/site/ascd/menuitem.3adeebc6736780dddeb3ffdb62108a0c/#videos>

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